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ABSTRACT

The general decline in public resources has encouraged government agencies to consolidate job functions, and the internal program evaluator is becoming a scarce commodity. This paper briefly describes a case study about the circumstances and implications of merging two formally antagonistic job roles: program administrator and program evaluator. As the designated advocate for a new family treatment program for juvenile offenders, the new program administrator found it increasingly difficult to maintain the balanced perspective of an evaluator. The reasons for this gradual shift in orientation, the eventual outcome for all concerned and a proposed solution to this organizational reality are discussed as a means to confront one of the most common practical problems facing evaluators in local government today--the attempt to relate program components to program outcomes for a new program which is continually developing and changing. The result would be that monitoring and assessment would be conducted as an integral part of program operations, and within this closed system, could serve as additional tools to improve and refine the development of an effective treatment model. (Author/PN)

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EVALUATOR AS ADMINISTRATOR:
WHY THE ADMINISTRATOR WON OUT.

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ABSTRACT

The general decline in public resources has encouraged government agencies to consolidate job functions, and the internal program evaluator is becoming a scarce commodity. This paper briefly describes a case study about the circumstances and implications of merging two formally antagonistic job roles: program administrator and program evaluator. As the designated advocate for a new family treatment program for juvenile offenders, the new program administrator found it increasingly difficult to maintain the balanced perspective of an evaluator. The reasons for this gradual shift in orientation, the eventual outcome for all concerned and a proposed solution to this organizational reality are discussed as a means to confront one of the most common practical problems facing evaluators in local government today.

As public resources and revenue continue to shrink, the mandate for evaluating social programs becomes less urgent, particularly at the local county government level. If programs are evaluated at all, government agencies are relying more and more on in-house personnel rather than contracting for outside expertise. One additional option available to reduce program costs is to collapse job positions - in this case, to assign all program tasks to one individual.

Superficially, this option may appear to be a more efficient means of insuring that both program administration and evaluation will take place. As Rezmovic (1984) points out, data collection for a process evaluation is easier when the evaluator is also the treatment administrator and thus has more control over measuring treatment implementation. However, trying to merge two roles which are, theoretically at least, diametrically and functionally opposed can create an untenable situation - one that can only be resolved by the creation of a new role.

Within most social programs, there is a clear separation between program administration and program evaluation responsibilities. The program manager is primarily concerned with the organizational and political consequences of program outcomes (Gurel, 1983). According to this perspective, a program evaluation, if properly designed, should provide specific information about the program in a timely fashion and should therefore serve as a planning tool to further the objectives of the organization. Evaluation reports should provide answers to specific questions and should be written to address a particular audience.

The evaluator, on the other hand, perceives the evaluation as a research study designed to objectively assess program effectiveness. As such, the evaluation should be methodologically rigorous, and should incorporate variables and measurement techniques which further this research objective regardless of political and/or organizational consequences. Moreover, evaluation reports should provide accurate information about program operations and outcomes regardless of the audience to be addressed (Gurel, 1983; Weiss, 1983).

Essentially, the administrator is invested in the success of a program which is perceived as the concrete representation of both larger organizational goals and values, and individual competence. For the evaluator, on the other hand, the program is part of the major treatment variable (in a summative evaluation) which is hypothesized to have some differential effect on a particular group of outcome measures. Competence, in this case, will be judged by the quality of the design. Whether the program is a "success" or "failure" is a question to be answered, not an outcome to be explained or defended.

While these roles are antagonistic to each other, both play an important part in the development of an effective service model (Gurel, 1983; Riecken & Boruch, 1974). Thus, despite fiscal constraints, a government agency may try to maintain these functions within a particular program. The case in point concerns a local government office in the Department of Social Services which was beginning a new residential community-based program for juvenile offenders in the fall of 1982 (Tisne, 1985).

The government office was the administrative body which contracted with a private voluntary agency to operate the program. The evaluation design included random assignment of participants to two treatment groups by a detailed sampling procedure. The purpose of the evaluation, according to agency decision-makers, was to determine whether this new program was effective and cost-efficient in reducing recidivism. As a result of personnel shortages, both the program administration and evaluation tasks were assigned to one individual - me.

Although my background was research-oriented and my initial commitment was to implement an experimental design to test program effectiveness, I was also required to market the program as a viable treatment model to potential referral sources. Furthermore, it was my responsibility to explain and justify any operating and/or population difficulties to agency decision-makers. In order to function as an advocate for a program, individuals must be invested in the conceptual framework of the treatment model and, therefore, in the efficacy of the service outcomes (Rezmovic, Cook, & Dobson, 1981). This affiliation and identification with program goals can create a bias which is contrary to the evaluation perspective, making it difficult to objectively assess questions concerning program effectiveness. In this particular case, a sustained period of low intake levels generated serious questions regarding program viability. Subsequent discussions of this problem focused on the possible causes.

There were both anticipated and unanticipated problems which arose during the first year of the program and which could have had an impact on admissions:

1. An unanticipated state-wide drop in admissions to juvenile detention facilities. Youngsters admitted to the program originated from a detention facility. However, contrary to the needs assessment, detention admissions levels for the entire state were lower than anticipated. During the following year, admissions rates returned to expected levels. While there was much speculation about the causes for this anomaly, no one could determine how or why this happened. The impact on the program, however, was considerable.

2. Decreasing referrals from probation officers. As the primary referral source, much attention and effort was spent in explaining program philosophy, goals and hopes to Probation Department staff who would be making the majority of referrals to the program. In the attempt to generate enthusiasm for the anticipated accomplishments of the program, perhaps unrealistic expectations were also created. Like any new program, the first few months were consumed with initial implementation problems and a comparatively high percentage of the cases "failed". This initial experience with the program dramatically affected subsequent attitudes of several Probation officers. This, in turn, negatively affected the number of referrals made to the program.

3. Changes in the eligibility criteria. The initial eligibility criteria for program participation did not include several characteristics which were later found to be associated with program "failure". Therefore, they were added to the list of

initial criteria to be met and thus, further restricted the pool of participants eligible for admission.

Although admission levels could have been affected by any or all of these factors, program operators argued for abandonment of randomized selection as the primary cause for the shortage. The sample design required that two eligible candidates be available for every one program vacancy. Certainly, requiring two children for every opening creates a strain on the pool of available participants (Goldman, 1977; Medlar, Schneider, & Schneider, 1981). However, attention to the other factors less critical to the integrity of the research design could have had a comparable impact on admissions, e.g., more active outreach to probation officers as the primary referral agents; permitting children on probation supervision but not in detention to enter the sampling pool as eligible subjects. Alternative approaches such as these were discussed but eventually dismissed as either ineffective or impractical.

Since the evaluator was functionally split between administering and measuring the program, the evaluation perspective was not adequately explained or defended during these discussions. Certainly, a program must continue to operate in order to provide the services that are being evaluated. If the survival of a program is threatened by the stringent requirements of a vigorous experimental design, everyone would agree that the design as a secondary component of the project must be altered or abandoned. On the other hand, this argument presupposes that program survival is a benefit and should be continued at any cost. It also assumes that

suspending random selection is the only cause or the most expendable factor in an array of possible reasons for low intake levels.

Abandoning the research design makes it extremely difficult to answer the questions that need to be answered regarding new experimental programs (Riecken & Boruch, 1974). In addition, it permits program operators to avoid questions regarding premature discharges. For example, it may be that an adequate sampling pool could be maintained if program participants remained at the program for the full term of their placement contract. Unplanned discharges are events that can be examined within the context of experimental methodology. Without that methodology, the relationship between program and/or client variables and outcomes is difficult to assess. By relinquishing the demands of the methodology, the program operators were temporarily increasing the pool of eligible candidates. However, they were also abandoning the ability to assess the viability of their model.

As the administrator, I could no longer adequately represent the evaluative viewpoint. In the end, the random sampling design was sacrificed, and the evaluator (me) facilitated rather than prevented its demise. As the months progressed, I became increasingly disillusioned with the original mandate to evaluate the outcomes of a program which was constantly changing. The evaluation design was hindering rather than helping the program to adapt to the problems that continued to occur. By the time interim reports were issued, they were already obsolete. The exclusive focus on outcomes was now totally irrelevant since outcomes were related to an organic

entity consistently in flux. Eventually, this realization as well as the various pressures from different groups of stakeholders led to a role reversal. I became identified with the program as a spokesperson. I was no longer an objective observer. Believing that a final evaluation report would not only jeopardize the existence of the program but would also present a totally erroneous picture of what had transpired, I argued against completion of the report. In fact, no final evaluation study ever appeared for this program.

This experience has provided me with some retrospective thoughts about a possible solution to this seemingly inevitable role confusion. If it is necessary to combine two conflicting roles in one individual, then the evaluation function must complement rather than oppose the administration function. The exclusive focus of administrative personnel on evaluating outcomes and effectiveness for new programs must be altered by the evaluator. Assumptions such as "what the program is today is what it is tomorrow" and "what happens to the participants in the beginning is the same as what will happen to them later" must be corrected so that the decision-maker's desire to know about effectiveness can be delayed until the program becomes somewhat more stabilized.

If a Department is committed to some means of objective program assessment, the evaluator's first and primary task should be to convince a director or manager to use program data for on-going adjustments and feedback to program operators rather than for assessing outcomes. For a new program which is continually

developing and changing, trying to relate program components to program outcomes is a useless and perhaps destructive pursuit. Rather, a process evaluation which monitors the day-to-day program activities and provides continuous feedback to program personnel can act as another perspective in the constant effort to improve operations.

By persuading managers to adopt this evaluative perspective, perhaps the responsibilities and functions of the evaluator and the administrator can co-exist without sabotaging either role. Rather than the detached, generalist perspective usually characteristic of the evaluator role, the evaluator/administrator is now a subjective participant and is involved in the day-to-day vagaries of program operation. This subjectivity does not necessarily mean that evaluation cannot take place. Rather, it means that program monitoring and assessment will have to be conducted as an integral part of program operations, and within this closed system, can serve as an additional tool to improve and refine the development of an effective treatment model.

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